IT REALLY IS MORE BLESSED
Acts 20:28-35
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

One of the unfulfilled dreams of the preacher is to have his people hear as if for the first time. If familiarity doesn't always breed contempt, it does have a way of reducing our critical faculties. Hitler knew that if he made a statement frequently enough, regardless of how outlandish it was, people would soon stop thinking critically about it and it would subtly enter the realm of common truth. The Orwellian manipulators of public opinion in the People's Republic of China have refined the practice to an art form. Persons who one day are regarded as patriotic heroes, are attacked by way of wall posters all over Peking the next day: and the sheer weight of the attack causes most of the people to change their minds. In fact, so efficient is the process that it is possible for a person to fall from grace through the wall posters but then fall back into favor a short time thereafter. Repetition has a way of causing us to suspend our critical faculties.

Thus one of dreams of every preacher is to have his people hear - as if for the first time: somehow to erase the accumulation of the years, the thousands of times the words have been read and spoken, and get at them with every critical faculty alert and functioning. I would submit that there is no more astounding assertion in the Bible than our text this morning but that we have heard it intoned and invoked so very many times we have never thought about it critically.

In a sense the whole Christian story is wildly improbable and suffers from familiarity. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem in the middle of a Roman census is an incredible tale. He lived in an obscure village, never traveled very far from home, emerged briefly in the life of His nation and was dead within three years.

The things He said in that brief public career were as improbable as He was. In the raw, rough world of the first century He talked about gentleness and compassion. In a world where a sword was the only going symbol of power He talked about the power of love. He told people to walk an extra mile when a soldier pressed them into duty as a luggage carrier. He advised them to offer their shirt when someone demanded their coat. He recommended turning the other cheek.

He said some altogether startling things. And among the most improbable of all is a little sentence, not even recorded in the Gospels, but remembered and attributed to Him by St. Paul: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Or, as the New English Bible renders it: "Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving."

We've heard it a thousand times, usually from the minister just before the offering plate is passed. And that's unfortunate because if it is true, we know a secret that few others seem to know. If, in fact, happiness is found in giving, we know the answer to a question everyone is asking.

It is, I would submit, one of the most radical things Jesus ever said. And I invite you to try to think about it this morning as if you had just heard it for the very first time. In order to combat the notion that the saying is totally removed from the real world I would bring into focus two contemporary witnesses who should get our attention. Karl Menninger, for instance, who said, "Money giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill people." And Dr. Roy R. Grinker, whose name you probably don't know but who has written an article in the October issue of Psychology Today under the title, "The Poor Rich". Dr. Grinker is a Chigago psychiatrist one of whose specialties is the

treatment of children of the very wealthy. He describes the patients he sees as privileged but self-centered, hypochondriachal, bored, intolerant, fructrated, empty and totally unhappy. In fact, according to Dr. Grinker his privileged patients are most like very poor children. His article ends with a case study of sorts involving a young woman, frivolous, on heavy drugs, promiscuous, with no friends, no interests other than her own amusement, engaged in a variety of destructive behavior patterns. She was "desperately hungry for some kind of feeling inside her to fill a void that could be relieved only by drugs and sleep." After a period of therapy the young woman began to visit art museums and gradually discovered something outside herself. In turn she found something inside herself worth expressing and giving. She began to paint and then to collect art. Finally she went back to school and earned her Ph.D. in Art History and is today somewhat of an authority respected in national art circles. She found something to which to give herself and it made all the difference in the world.

Now, let's return to the text: the setting itself is most interesting. Paul was traveling from Greece to Jerusalem. In fact, he was retracing his steps from other journeys stopping in the towns and villages where he had earlier established churches. His purpose seems to have been to see how the young Christian Communities were faring, and also to see - probably for the last time - his old and dear friends. He realized that he might be arrested in Jerusalem - which is precisely what happened. It was, that is to say, far more than a pleasure trip and Paul would have wanted to deal with those Christian people in the same way as we try to crowd the last minute before the children leave the house with vital information, wisdom, advice, warnings and threats.

Instead of visiting Ephesus where he had lived for three years he sent for the Elders of the Church and they met in the city of Miletus. It must have been a very moving reunion. What he said to them on the occasion is recorded in the 20th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: he recalled his life among them: he urged them to be faithful in times of stress and persecution: and he said, "keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, who Himself said, 'Happiness lies more in giving than receiving.'"

With that they embraced, prayed and wept together. The Ephesian Elders escorted Paul to his ship and never saw him again. Now, I've taken you through that brief history because Paul didn't simply drop this saying of Jesus in the midst of a discourse on Christian living. Rather, it is summation: the last thing he said to dear friends. It is, I would suggest, the essence of the matter of Christianity, according to St. Paul.

Let's look more closely still. We are most familiar with the Revised Standard Version translation: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." The trouble with that is that the word "blessed" is not used anywhere I know of outside the Bible or certain churchly rubrics. We grew up reciting the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: Blessed are the meek: Blessed are they that mourn." We sang "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine." We heard our Roman friends refer to the "Blessed Virgin". Try as I might I could not think of "blessed" used other than those three - and none of them, on the surface at least, sounds very exciting or even moderately interesting. "Blessed" frankly is a pretty pompous word: it reminds me of sticky piety, saintliness in the worst sense, Wednesday night prayer meeting and no baseball on Sunday afternoon. I have never been terribly interested in "blessedness": nor have you - which may be one of the reasons we've never thought seriously about how we might achieve it.

"Happiness" is a different matter. There isn't anyone uninterested in happiness. And it so happens that the Greek word which got translated "blessed" several centuries ago by King James' scholars really meant a rather lusty, worldly, secular glee: hilarity, fun, happiness. It is not, in Greek at least, a state of piety at all - such as that described in stanza two of the hymn "Blessed Assurance" - "visions of rapture now burst on my sight." The word really means a carefree wholeness in all of life. The new translation is, in this case, far more accurate. "Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving."

Please notice that the saying does not suggest that it is wrong to receive or get. It does not propose that a giver is morally superior to a receiver. It does not suggest that a person can be one to the exclusion of the other. It says, only, that it is happier to be a giver than to be a receiver.

Having looked at the statement literally and historically I think it is pertinent to ask whether or not it is true. Is it, in fact, demonstrably evident that more happiness is produced by giving than receiving? Dr Menninger thinks so if we may equate mental health with a degree of happiness. Dr. Roy Grinker, the Chicago psychiatrist, would probably not agree to be called in as support for a Christian Stewardship sermon, but I think he would agree to the truth of Jesus' statement.

Whose pleasure, after all, is the greatest - the one who gives the gift or the one who receives it? Who is happiest on Christmas morning? Whose delight is most intense - the one who planned and purchased and hid the surprise - or the one surprised, delighted and thrilled by it? It's at least a toss up. But more to the point, I think Jesus and Paul His interpreter, meant something about life style: the way we do our living in general. Everyone receives and everyone gives: I think Jesus meant to indicate that we are fundamentally, however, one or the other. And that if we are a giver, we will be happier. I think there is far more at stake here than passing the offering plate: more than Church budget. The issue is wholeness, happiness. It is a matter, rather, of a way of living, an approach to life which involves living for someone or something other than self: a daily self-giving, self-emptying for the sake of someone or something.

It has to do with a kind of giving described one time by Paul Tournier in a delightful paragraph: "For the child neither social convention nor money nor ownership count; what does count is the heart - given impetus. He will give all that he finds. It is an act of regal love for him to pick a pretty flower in a public park and offer it to his mother. Again, in the game of hide and seek, which children enjoy so much, they pretend to hide only for the purpose of giving themselves away again by coming out from their hiding places. The proof is in happy outbursts accompanying their discovery after such a brief time of hiding. The supreme gift is the giving of oneself." (The Meaning of Gifts).

The New Testament proposes that the giving of oneself is a very happy activity. The culture in which we live proposes that the opposite is true: that getting is the happiest possible situation. The doctrine of salvation current among us may be read in the advertisements in any slick national magazine. The chief end of man may be to glorify God and enjoy Him forever according to the Shorter Catechism, but according to the high priests on Madison Avenue nothing replaces buying, acquiring and owning.

Archibald MacLeish in an article in Saturday Review several years ago suggested that the fundamental moral change was that Americans have become a society of consumers rather than producers and that the affluent society is structured on the morally weak proposition that happiness is getting everything one wants. But let's not be guilty of masochism about our nation. WE may have more goods but we do not own the monopoly on sin. Harvey Cox in his latest book on the appeal of Eastern Religion indicts American culture for its greed. Martin Marty, in a review of the book pleads with Professor Cox to tell us where in the world - or when in history - that has been different. Greed - getting - having - owning - we ought by now to understand - are part of the human situation. Our problem is egotism, our original sin is inveterate self-centeredness. It is what Jesus Christ came to save us from.

I will never forget the day a cement truck overturned in our neighborhood, spewing its contents all over the street. People acted as if gold were lying in the gutters: they carried it off in boxes, baskets, wagons: one man spread newspapers in the trunk of his car and shoveled it in. And as I watched and fought the impulse to join in I knew suddenly what John Calvin was talking about.

Why, for instance, the eternal fascination with gambling - or that ingenious device by which we induce the poor to finance the services we will not pay for called the State Lottery? Why the endless stream of contests, punch cards, jingles and trading stamps?

The implications are far deeper than commerce alone. We are in the midst of a revoluation in sexual mores which says loudly and clearly, "if you want it, take it: if it feels good, do it." We have been called a Sensate Culture obsessed with instant gratification. What seems most important is to get mine now, before it's too late.

Even in the matter of our religion we seem to expect to get. Our verb forms reveal our theology. We talk about "having" faith - as if it were something we owned. We have it all backwards, of course. The late Paul Tillich was very helpful when he wrote: "In Christianity truth is found if it is done, and done if it is found." (Shaking of the Foundations, p.116,117). Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew that and expanded on it by teaching that faith is an act of obedience to Jesus Christ and that we waste our time waiting for something to happen to us spiritually before we begin to obey and follow Him. And Albert Schweitzer addressed the matter directly by observing that a person will never be happy until he or she finds something in life bigger than himself or herself: something for the sake of which one can give self away.

It is Stewardship Sunday. Every member of this congregation has been asked to be a giver. There are two issues involved: one far more important than the other. The first is the program of this church represented on paper by a budget. You are being asked to support it financially. You know what it costs to do what we have set out to do here together. You know that your contribution is a way for you to have a part in the mission of Jesus Christ and a share in God's Kingdom coming in the world.

The second, and much more important issue is you and your faith and your happiness. What God wants is human health and wholeness. Giving money to the church is a way you can provide it for others through the programs of the church. But it is also the way you can give it to yourself. That, it seems to me, is the best news of all: that happiness does lie more in giving than in receiving.

To be a Christian is to be an incurable giver: in relationships with others - husbands, wives, children, parents, neighbors, friends, strangers - to give more than to get. It is to give self away and to discover the pure joy in doing it.

That's happy: that's incredibly good when it happens: that's precisely what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And it is to that - that other-directed, generous, joyful life we are called: to the amazing discovery that it really is more blessed to give.

Amen.

Father, we are the benefactors of Your generosity. We receive Your daily gifts of food and air and sunshine and Your ultimate gifts of freedom and love. We are grateful. Help us to know anew that in giving we receive the fullest measure of joy: that in giving we live life as You created it to be lived: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.